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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest considers the present state of teaching about Latin America in elementary and secondary schools in the United States, the need and rationale for Latin American studies, effective approaches to teaching Latin American studies, and resources to supplement textbooks that treat Latin America inadequately. Following an introductory section describing the incomplete or biased portrait of Latin America frequently presented in social studies textbooks and the media, four considerations for including more about Latin America in the curriculum are listed: (1) foreign policy--international controversies over the influence of other governments in the politics of Latin America need analysis and examination; (2) physical proximity--Latin American countries are virtually next-door neighbors, with close political, commercial, and cultural interactions with the United States extending over many years, (3) the American heritage--Latin American culture and the Spanish language are part of the American heritage, exerting early and continuing influence on the southwestern region of the United States, and (4) negative stereotyping--it is well documented that Hispanic-Americans in general suffer from explicit negative stereotyping. The world history course is recommended as an especially fertile ground for introducing a Latin American perspective into a study of world events. Classroom strategies and suggestions for a separate Latin American studies course are followed by information on sources of materials and a list of resources. (LH)

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LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

ERIC Digest No. 19

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LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES

Gallup polls indicate that Latin America—Mexico, Central America, South America, and the independent countries of the Caribbean—is a region about which U.S. citizens are poorly informed (Glab 1981). Yet there are practical reasons of politics and economics, as well as cultural and historical reasons, why U.S. citizens should be well informed about Latin America.

This ERIC Digest considers the present state of teaching about Latin America in elementary and secondary schools, the need and rationale for Latin American studies, effective approaches to teaching Latin American studies, and resources to supplement textbooks which treat Latin America inadequately.

The Present State of Teaching About Latin America

Social studies textbooks and media often present an incomplete or biased portrait of the countries making up Latin America. Newspapers and television news programs tend to focus on spectacular events related to earthquakes, terrorism, coups, and U.S. foreign policy related to the region. "It is rare to find stories on the arts, humanities, or culture of Latin America" (Glab 1981, 69). The same is true of textbook representation. A recent survey of ten high school texts revealed that "with the exception of one textbook, little recognition was given to cultural characteristics" (Fleming 1982). Latin American history was presented primarily in the context of U.S. foreign policy. The point of view of Latin American countries was rarely considered. Textbooks often created or reinforced negative stereotypes of Latin America and its citizens.

The Need and Rationale for Teaching about Latin America

Glab (1981, 13) offers the following considerations for including more about Latin America in the curriculum.

1. **Foreign Policy.** International controversies over the influence of other governments in the politics of Latin America need analysis and examination.

2. **Physical Proximity.** Latin American countries are virtually next-door neighbors, "with close political, commercial, and cultural interactions with the United States extending over many years."

3. **The American Heritage.** Latin American culture and the Spanish language are part of the American heritage, exerting early and continuing influence on what are now the states of Texas, California, New Mexico, and Arizona.

4. **Negative Stereotyping.** It is well documented that Hispanic-Americans in general "suffer from explicit negative stereotyping."

In addition to those suggested by Glab, other considerations, based on commonality, exist. Shared problems include traffic congestion, pollution, and crime, related to urbanization; unemployment and slow economic growth; concentration of ownership of agricultural land; and government debt.

Effective Approaches to Teaching Latin American Studies

In his analysis of high school textbook treatment of Latin America, Fleming (1982) points out that "a major source of information on Latin America should be the social studies classroom" (p. 168). The world history course offers an especially fertile ground for introducing a Latin American perspective into a study of world events. As an article in the *World History Bulletin* stresses, "The New World was not simply the passive recipient of European civilization; rather, it modified and changed Europe's civilization and contributed to the development of the Old World" (Burns 1984, 4).

Case studies, decision-making exercises, and role playing have been effective methods of

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introducing Latin American culture and erasing preconceived notions about that region.

A separate Latin American studies course would itself be interdisciplinary in nature, making use of subject areas such as science, art, literature, mathematics, the Spanish language, computer science, and the social sciences. The course would require students to apply a variety of social studies skills and concepts and would be applicable to students of diverse grade levels, skills, and socio-economic backgrounds. When possible, bilingual terminology would be employed.

Sources of Materials on Latin America

In the conclusion to his survey of the representation of Latin America in high school textbooks, Fleming (1982) suggests that "classroom teachers have much work to do on their own if students are to acquire a clear understanding of the United States' relations with Latin America. Teachers should be prepared to update and supplement textbooks with current information and contemporary issues" (p. 171).

Good sources of information do exist. Exemplary materials and curriculum units are available on loan from the Stanford University SPICE/Latin America project. Materials from the SPICE project are also available through the ERIC system (see Wirth 1984 reference below).

An annotated bibliography of recent textbooks, teaching guides, and audiovisual materials is available from ERIC/ChESS, 855 Broadway, Boulder, CO 80302. Request the "Reference Sheet on Latin American Studies." (Price: $0.50 each with a minimum order of $2.00; you may wish to send for the publications catalog to receive a list of all reference sheets and ERIC digests available from ERIC/ChESS.)

Finally, a number of commercial publishers offer separate textbooks on Latin America/Canada or Latin America, mostly at the intermediate grade level.

Conclusion

Present and potential eruptions of violence have made Latin America an international "hotspot." Currently, events in the region are prominent in the daily news. Such events are closely monitored by nations all over the world, many of whom have strong political and economic interests in the region.

The U.S. should have a particular concern for Latin America. An understanding of the region's cultural diversity, values, and life styles, as well as appreciation for its contributions to the arts and sciences, could lead to a greater mutual respect among the American nations and perhaps to less reliance on dictatorships and violence as solutions to the very real social, economic, and political problems that plague our neighbors to the south.

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